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ABSTRACT

Eighteenth century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid's emphasis on first principles of knowledge is fundamental to his ethics of rhetoric. Reid found the reduction of mental activities to material phenomena by Hobbes and others to be particularly odious and destructive of common sense. Turning to the analysis of human nature, he developed a radical distinction between mental and physical processes and posited the existence of a natural faculty, "common" or "moral" sense, that intuitively perceives truth and falsity. He enumerated sets of first principles governing necessary truths, contingent truths, and moral truths. His six general and five particular first principles of morals apply to three fundamental problems in the ethics of rhetoric: (1) identifying legitimate ends of discourse, (2) legitimizing techniques of influence, and (3) educating the moral rhetor. Although it is unlikely that knowledge of one rhetorical system contributes to knowledge of another, Reid's philosophy has much of potential interest to us because there is a close parallel between the problems he confronted and some with which rhetorical theorists struggle today. (JL)

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ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THOMAS REID'S PHILOSOPHY OF RHETORIC

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I was delighted to accept the invitation to talk about Thomas Reid's ethics of rhetoric because neither Reid nor his rhetorical doctrines are as well known as they ought to be. Reid is best known as David Hume's philosophical antagonist--a role in which he earned even Hume's respect--and as founder of the philosophy of "common sense." Historically, these are important roles but the contemporaneous development of his rhetorical and ethical doctrines is equally interesting.[1]

There is nothing particularly remarkable about Reid's early life, but Hume's Treatise of Human Nature (1739) shook him from his philosophical slumber.[2] His appointment as Regent at Kings College, Aberdeen in 1751 positioned him to confront the leading philosophical issues of his day and furnished him access to some of the leading minds of his era. Formation of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society (or "Wise Club") in 1758 afforded a sympathetic forum for his speculations and introduced him to systematic investigations of rhetoric. Preserved minutes of the society show that discussions at its bimonthly meetings contributed to publication of George Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric (1776), James Beattie's Essay on Truth (1770), Alexander Gerard's Essay on Genius (1776), and Reid's own Inquiry into the Human Mind (1764).[3]

Curiously, the record of Reid's activities during this period shows little interest in rhetoric. While Campbell and others engaged in disputes about the nature of discourse and

kindred topics, Reid discussed sensation, perception, the orbit of Venus, and Euclid's axioms.

Reid's apparent disinterest in Rhetoric ended abruptly when he was appointed to succeed Adam Smith as Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow. Reid arrived at Glasgow in the Fall of 1764 and the text of his introductory lecture includes a request for copies of Smith's notes on "morals, jurisprudence, politics, [and] rhetoric."[4] I have found nothing to indicate he received copies and what appear to be his earliest lectures on rhetoric are dated from the following Spring (March 1765). These early lecture notes are crude outlines of classical precept, and their brevity and frequent emendations give the impression of hasty composition. However, subsequent lectures are considerably more voluminous and an interesting progression can be observed in comparing the preserved manuscripts. Reid appears to have devoted considerable recurrent attention to rhetoric over the years and the development of his ideas can be traced from one manuscript to the next. My reconstruction remains tentative because many manuscripts are undated, but I see three distinct manuscript generations. The earliest manuscripts are mere abstracts of classical works, and Cicero and Quintilian appear to have been his primary sources. A second generation shows Reid attempting to illustrate classical precepts with excerpts from contemporary literature. He seems to have been preoccupied with stylistic concerns for a time and his manusript remains include lengthy collections of "literary anecdotes and bon mots." Finally, near the close of his career, Reid appears to have recognized some implications of his philosophy for rhetoric. The third

generation of manuscripts contains a comprehensive theory of discourse and it is to his body of material that I refer in talking about Reid's "philosophy of rhetoric"--a term I use as a generic one but which the program compositor has erroneously turned into a proper title. When this final generation emerged is unclear, but it must have been attended with great energy and excitement. Manuscripts from this generation are often in disarray, writing is cramped and difficult to read, and hastily edited fragments from earlier generations are frequently interleaved. The development of Reid's thought during this final period is evident in an incomplete set of student notes. The notes fill one small bound notebook and end abruptly with the notation "End of Volume 1st 1774."[5] The discussion of rhetoric in the preserved manuscript is broken after a few introductory remarks about eloquence and I've not found a second volume if one exists. However, the notebook includes a general plan of the lectures which shows rhetoric integrated into a systematic corpus of knowledge. In Reid's schema, rhetoric is a fine art relying upon natural signs to produce mental effects through material representations. Within this context, Reid described the nature and function of eloquence, the kinds of discourse defined by speakers' intentions and by situational factors, and the materials or canons of rhetoric. I have described Reid's handling of these topics elsewhere and a detailed summary is not required here.[6] However, Reid's emphasis on first principles of knowledge is fundamental to his ethics of rhetoric.

FIRST PRINCIPLES

The prevailing doctrine of Reid's era depicted mental activity as simple manipulation of mental images or ideas. Such images were said to be derived from experience and manipulated through processes akin to the mechanics of physical association. And, the mechanical rigidity of prominent portrayals implied that human knowledge and behavior could be explained without recourse to meaning and intention. For example, Hume portrayed thinking as the combination of simple ideas governed by principles of resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect. Both Hobbes and Hartley adopted even more extreme positions in attempting to reduce mental activities to material phenomena on the grounds that mental activity always appears to be preceded by physiological or neurological events. Reid found this reduction to be particularly odious and argued that "The theory of ideas, like the Trojan horse, had a specious appearance both of innocence and beauty," but "it carried in its belly death and destruction to all science and common sense."[7] The inconsistency between dictates of the ideal system and beliefs necessary for daily life furnished Reid with persuasive arguments and employs them at every opportunity. For example, he describes the philosophical reconstruction of perception employing the theory of ideas and notes that it leads to doubt about the veracity of the senses.

> But what is the consequence [he asks]? I resolve not to believe my senses. I break my nose against a post that comes in my way; I step into a dirty kennel; and, after twenty such wise and rational actions, I am

taken up and clapped into a mad-house. Now, I confess I would rather make one of the credulous fools whom nature imposes upon, than of those wise and rational philosophers who resolve to withhold assent at all this expense.[8]

Faced with absurd consequences flowing from the ideal system and unable to find flaws in Hume's tightly knit argument, Reid concluded that the premises must be in error. His attacks on the ideal system take shape in his unpublished graduation oration delivered at Aberdeen in 1759 in which he makes the following points:

1. the ideal system is contrary to experience because we all believe we perceive external objects directly.
2. There is no evidence supporting the existence of ideas in the specialized sense the term is used by philosophers.
3. Disagreements among philosophers about the nature of ideas casts doubt on their existence.
4. Ideas are not sufficient to account for the phenomena they were introduced to explain.
5. The ideal system produces consequences which are contrary to the common sense of mankind.[9]

In search of an alternative system, Reid turned to analysis of human nature. He began by developing a radical distinction between mental and physical processes. Mind and body are unique entities, he argues, and this implies that the concepts employed in analyzing one cannot be assumed to be relevant to analysis of

the other.

> The powers of Body and those of Mind are so totaly different and so very unlike to each other as gives the strongest presumption that both cannot belong to one & the same Subject. For what things in Nature can be more unlike or more unrelated than Extension is to Thought, or Figure to memory or gravitation to reasoning. It is evident therefore that the Qualities of Matter whether organized or unorganized are quite of another Nature from the powers of the mind.[10]

On the basis of his inquiries, Reid also posited existence of a natural faculty which intuitive.y perceives truth and falsity. This faculty is called "common sense" and the "moral sense." In the absence of such a faculty, humanity would be helpless because reasoning would be limited to inferring conclusions from sets of premises. We would be trapped in an infinite regress because the premises at every step in a chain of reasoning could be challenged and reason alone ultimately would be unable to sustain any conclusion. To combat this difficulty, Reid argued that reason has a second function: viz, the intuitive recognition of first principles.[11] Such principles do not admit of "direct, or apodictical proof," but there are accepted ways of identifying them [12] and we can be assured of their existence. Reid describes these principles in the following passage.

> Before men can reason together, they must agree in first principles; and it is impossible to reason with a man who has no principles in common with you. There are, therefore, common principles, which are the

> foundation of all reasoning and of all science. Such common principles seldom admit of direct proof, nor do they need it. Men need not to be taught them; for they are such as all men of common understanding know; or such, at least, as they give a ready assent to, as soon as they are proposed and understood. [13]

Reid enumerates sets of first principles governing necessary truths, contingent truths, and moral truths. Principles of the first two types support his theory of knowledge while the moral truths buttress his ethics of rhetoric.

ETHICS OF RHETORIC

"Morals," Reid says, "like all other sciences, must have first principles, on which moral reasoning is grounded. . . . They are the foundation on which the whole fabric of the science leans." [14] In his Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind, Reid enumerates six first principles of morals that apply to virtue and vice ingeneral and five that "are more paticular."[15] He does not explicitly link these principles to rhetorical concerns but many are clearly relevant. In this section, I will sketch their application to three fundamental problems in the ethics of rhetoric.

The first problem to which Reid's principles apply is identifying legitimate ends of discourse. Apparently relying on Campbell's model, Reid identifies five types of discourse defined by the faculty addressed. Thus, informative discourse is addressed to the understanding, argumentative discourse is addressed to the judgment, persuasive discourse is addressed to

the will, and so forth. [16] The ethical question concerns legitimization of specific ends within each category. To my knowledge, Reid's thoughts on this question are unrecorded but several principles are clearly applicable. Without quoting the principles in detail, it is evident that Reid believed that the ends sought by speakers are subject to moral evaluation (general principle 1), rhetors are culpable when they fail to speak in support of worthwhile ends (general principle 3), rhetors are obligated to acquire knowledge sufficient to judge the ends of discourse (general principles 5 and 6), and the social nature of humanity furnishes the ultimate criterion by which discoursive objectives are to be judged (particular principles 2, 3, and 4). Reid writes:

> No man is born for himself only. Every man, therefore, ought to consider himself as a member of the common society of mankind, and of those subordinate societies to which he belongs, such as family, friends, neighbourhood, country, and to do as much good as he can, and as little hurt to the societies of which he is a part. This axiom leads directly to the practice of every social virtue, and indirectly to the virtues of self-government, by which only we can be qualified for discharging the duty we owe to society. [17]

Thus, discoursive ends which contribute to the strength of society are laudable while those that diminish it are objects of condemnation.

The second problem to which Reid's principles apply is

legitimization of techniques of influence. At least since Plato, the fact that rhetors employ nonrational, emotional techniques of influence has provided the foundation for condemnations of rhetoric. Reid is unimpressed with this line of argument and his response should find a sympathetic audience at this gathering. Reid contends that behavior is rightly governed by many principles working in conjunction with reason.

> The Author of our being has given us not only the power of acting within a limited sphere, but various principles or springs of action, of different nature and dignity, to direct us in the exercise of our active power. . . . In treating of the principles of action in man, it has been shown, that as his natural instincts and bodily appetites, are well adapted to the preservation of his natural life, and to the continuance of the species; so his natural desires, affections, and passions, when uncorrupted by vicious habits, and under the government of leading principles of reason and conscience, are excellently fitted for the rational and social life. [18]

Since nonrational principles of action are required by our station in life, it is proper for orators to appeal to them. It is the appeal to the passions which gives rise to the "highest species of eloquence" which Reid describes as follows.

> From what has been said it appears evident that this kind of Eloquence, which is intended to perswade & influence to Action will for the most part consist in a proper Mixture of the Pathetick and the Argumentative.

> Where it is purely argumentative, as we have shewn it ought to be in some Cases, it can hardly deserve the Name of Vehement. But the Vehement is then proper where from the Nature of the Case, there is fair access not onely to address the Judgment but the Passions It was in such Cases that Ancient Orators displayed all the Thunder of their Eloquence In accusing the Guilty in defending the Innocent at the Bar, in perswading War or Peace the enacting of Laws or repealing them in the Senate or Popular Assembly.[19]

The final problem to which Reid's principles apply is educating the moral rhetor. Reid's view of moral education is complicated by the fact that he believes the ability to recognize first principles is a natural ability requiring neither education nor instruction in Ethics. His efforts to resolve the seeming contradiction created by his employment as professor of moral philosophy are evident in a series of lectures on "Culture Of Mind."[20] Dated between 1765 and 1770, only small portions of these lectures were subsequently published. Reid's argument runs as follows. The ability to recognize first principles is natural, but it may never develop if not properly exercised.

> From all that has been said upon this subject I think it is sufficiently evident that nature has implanted in man only the seeds as it were of those powers which distinguish man so much above the brutes. And that those seeds by proper culture may be raised so as to produce the noble fruits of wisdom and virtue, or by

neglect and want of culture may be checked and totally destroyed.[21]

Proper culture helps students form clear conceptions of the objects of moral judgment and to reason justly from first principles without being swayed by prejudice and self-interest. These aims do not depend on knowledge of formal systems of ethics and the case is analogous to the development of perception in general.

> As a man may be a good judge of colours, and of the other visible qualities of objects, without any knowledge of the anatomy of the eye, and of the theory of vision, so a man may have a very clear and comprehensive knowledge of what is right and what is wrong in human conduct, who never studied the structure of our moral powers. [22]

Rather than trying to teach formal systems of ethics, instructors should give students the opportunity to practice making moral judgments. Reid's vocabulary does not include the phrase, but it seems clear that what he has in mind is the "case study method". Students should first study cases in which they have no involvement. Only after developing their ability to judge the activities of strangers can they turn to cases in which they have an interest. Reid suggests that they judge the acts of friends before judging their own and that they practice judging their own past acts before judging current conduct. [23] Thus, he articulates a rationale for use of case studies in developing students' natural moral powers.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I've described the foundation of Reid's ethical system and its application to fundamental problems in the ethics of rhetoric. The question of what we learn by studying Reid's position is one that troubles me because I doubt that knowledge of one rhetorical system contributes to knowledge of another.[24] However, the clear parallels between Reid's situation and ours have caused me to rethink parts of my own position.

Reid's philosophy has much of potential interest to us because there is a close parallel between the problems he confronted and some with which we now struggle. Just as we have challenged the foundations of logical positivism and behaviorism, Reid rejected the philosophical orthodoxy of his day. And, just as we have turned to analysis of the human condition in our search for alternative grounds, Reid turned to the nature of humanity in his search for the first principles of moral reasoning.[25]

Reid's tone moderated with age, but his writings consistently display a sense of outrage at a philosophical doctrine which separates knowledge from common sense, reason from humanity. In both the end of reasserting the legitimacy of popular wisdom and the reliance upon discourse as an indicator of wisdom, Reid's position is a striking anticipation of many doctrines with which we are familiar.

NOTES

[1] Reid's lectures about rhetoric remain unpublished but my Ph. D. dissertation, "Thomas Reid's Lectures on Eloquence"

(University of Iowa, 1977) reproduces some of the more important, and his manuscript remains are described in my article, "Thomas Reid's Rhetorical Theory: A Manuscript Report," Communication Monographs, 45 (1978), 258-264. For an attempt to reconstruct Reid's rhetorical doctrines from his published works, see William G. Kelley, Jr., "Thomas Reid's Communication Theory," Diss. Lousiana State University 1969.

[2] The best sources of biographical information about Reid are Dugald Steward, "Account of the Life and Writings of Thomas Reid, D. D.," Thomas Reid: Philosophical Works, ed. Sir William Hamilton, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Maclachan and Stewart, 1863), and Alexander Campbell Fraser, Thomas Reid, Famous Scotts Series (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1898).

[3] Minutes of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, preserved in manuscript at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland.

[4] Birkwood Ms. 2131.5 (68) (69).

[5] University of Edinburgh Ms. La. III, 176. This manuscript is described by Peter Kivy, "'Lectures on the Fine Arts': An Unpublished Manuscript of Thomas Reid's," Journal of the History of Ideas, 21 (1970), 17-32.

[6] "Thomas Reid's Fundamental Rules of Eloquence," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 64 (1978), 400-408, and "The Theory of Expression in Selected Eighteenth-Century Rhetorics," Explorations in Rhetoric, Ray E. McKerrow, ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1982). 119-136.

[7]

[8] Works, I, 184.

[9] "The Philosophical Orations of Thomas Reid," D. D. Todd, ed., Shirley M. L. Darcus, trans. (unpublished).

[10] Birkwood Ms. 2131.6 (I) (1), p. 5.

[11] See also Wayne N. Thompson, "Aristotle as a Predecessor to Reid's 'Common Sense,'" Speech Monographs, 42 (1975), 209-220.

[12] Reid proposes five tests of first principles: argument ad hominem, argument ad absurdum, the consent of ages and nations, consistency with opinions which predate education, and necessity in the conduct of life. Works, I, 439-441.

[13] Works, I, 231.

[14] Works, II, .

[15] Although this distinction is not explained fully, it appears to parallel the distinction between eida and topoi

introduced by Aristotle in Rhetorica I, 2 (1358a. 5-10).

[16] For discussion of parallels between Reid and Campbell, see Skopec, diss., 86-89.

[17] Works, II, .

[18] Works, II, .

[19] Birkwood ms. 2131.3 (III) (18) D.

[20] The culture of mind lectures are a bit scattered but the principal items include Birkwood Mss. 2131.7 (I) (2), 2131.7 (I) (3), 2131.7 (I) (4), 2131.7 (I) (5), 2131.7 (I) (6), 2131.7 (I) (7), 2131.7 (I) (8), 2131.7 (I) (10), 2131.7 (I) (15), 2131.7 (I) (23), and 2131.6 (II) (10). Reid's use of the term "culture" has a strong metaphoric component and is consistent with accepted practice in the eighteenth century.

[21] Birkwood Ms. 2131.7 (I) (2).

[22] Works, II, .

[23] Birkwood Ms. 2131.7 (I) (7).

[24] This may be the logical conclusion of the systems view of rhetoric proposed by Douglas Ehninger. See his articles "On Rhetoric and Rhetorics," Western Speech, 31 (1967), 242-249, "On Systems of Rhetoric," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 (1968), 131-144, "A Synoptic View of Systems of Western Rhetoric," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 61 (1975), and "The Promise of Rhetoric," H TEXNH, eds. Richard Leo Enos and William E. Weithoff (Falls Church, Va.: Speech Communication Association, 1978). For a brief exchange centering on the value of the systems perspective, see Eric Wm. Skopec, "Systems Theory as an Historiographic Perspective," Floyd D. Anderson, "On Systems of Western Rhetoric: A Response to 'Whig' Misreadings," and Michael C. Leff, "Concrete Abstractions: A Response to Anderson and Skopec," The Pennsylvania Speech Communication Annual, 38 (1982).

[25] There are several specific parallels between Reid's situation and our own that may warrent further exploration. His antagonists aligned with radical empiricists and behaviorists who treat human behavior as determinate while Reid is clearly in line with interpretive scholars who emphasize meaning, etc. Reid's argument in support of first principles parallels Perelman and others who identify the first principles of science and so forth in the commonly accepted approaches to study of phenomena in various domains.